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Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

9 AUG 1985

MEMORANDUM FOR: (see attached distribution)

FROM:

Director of Global Issues

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SUBJECT: Kuwaiti Airlines Hijacking: A Retrospective

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1. The attached memorandum assesses the evidence concerning responsibility for the planning, execution, and subsequent management of the December 1984 hijacking of the Kuwaiti Airlines flight to Tehran. It is our judgement that while Iran was not involved in planning the actual hijacking, Iranian authorities sought to exploit the incident

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2. This memorandum was prepared by Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis Division, Office of Global Issues.

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3. Your comments and suggestions on this memorandum are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Terrorism Analysis Branch, OGI,

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Attachment:

Kuwaiti Airlines Hijacking: A Retrospective
GIM 85-10176, 7 Aug 85

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SUBJECT: Kuwaiti Airlines Hijacking: A Retrospective [REDACTED]

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DDI/OGI/TNAD/TAB/[REDACTED] (7 August 1985)

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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

7 August 1985

Kuwaiti Airlines Hijacking: A RetrospectiveSummary

The available evidence indicates Iran was not involved in planning the 4-9 December 1984 Kuwaiti airliner hijacking and did not provide material support to the hijackers while the plane was on the ground in Tehran. Nevertheless, Iran's ambivalent handling of the incident on the ground indicated its sympathy for the hijackers and their goals. Iran pressed Kuwait to accede to the terrorists' demands and interfered with Kuwaiti negotiating efforts. 25X1

Finally, among Iran's conditions for the return of the aircraft is its demand that Kuwait fulfill the hijackers' principal demand--that is, the release from prison of the Iranian-backed terrorists responsible for the December 1983 bombings of US, French, and Kuwaiti installations in Kuwait. 25X1

a little-known Iranian law may guarantee amnesty and asylum to the hijackers in Iran. 25X1

This typescript was prepared by [redacted] Office of Global Issues, Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis Division, Terrorism Analysis Branch. Information as of 7 August 1985 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments are welcome and should be directed to Chief, Terrorism/Narcotics Analysis Division [redacted] 25X1

GI M 85-10176 [redacted] 25X1

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The Terrorists and Their Weapons

The hijackers were four Arabic-speaking males in their early twenties.¹ [redacted] the hijackers boarded the aircraft in Dubai after traveling from Beirut, Lebanon. Available evidence suggests the four were radical Lebanese Shias inspired by Iran's Islamic fundamentalism.

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- One of the terrorists said that members of his family had been killed in the Sabra-Shatila massacre in September 1982. Nearly half of the refugees living in those camps were Shias.
- Native Arabic-speakers among the crew and passengers aboard the aircraft identified the terrorists' accents as Lebanese.
- The hijackers' principal demand was that Kuwait release the prisoners convicted for the December 1983 bombings of the US and French embassies. The prisoners are members of the Iranian-backed Dawa Party, and three of them are from Lebanon.

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The debriefed hostages said the terrorists had as many as four handguns and one or two fragmentation-type grenades. Two of the handguns were small caliber (.22 or .25) automatic pistols, one was a .38 caliber revolver taken from the aircraft security guard, and the fourth may have been a .45 caliber handgun. Although the terrorists threatened to blow up the aircraft, there is no evidence that they had any explosives other than the grenades. Most of the hostages, including the flight crew, believe that the devices the terrorists claimed were explosives were not genuine. [redacted]

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¹The passengers said the hijackers identified themselves only as Abu Hassan (leader), Sameh, Khalid, and Abu Sharkah. [redacted]

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Whether or not the hijackers were assisted by outside accomplices remains unclear. The hostages said the hijackers did not receive additional weapons or other equipment while the plane was on the ground in Tehran. If true, the hijackers' weapons and equipment were either brought on board by them or by accomplices before reaching Tehran or else were acquired from passengers. Most of the debriefed passengers said security at Dubai and Kuwait airports was lax, making it easy for determined terrorists to bring weapons onto the aircraft. The security guard on board the aircraft searched the passengers only cursorily before they boarded the aircraft in Dubai. The handcuffs used on one American hostage were taken from the aircraft guard and the rope used to bind the hostages reportedly came from the baggage of a Pakistani passenger. The pilot said the hand-held radio used by the hijackers was forcibly taken from an Iranian official while he was delivering food to the aircraft. [REDACTED]

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In contrast, a Pakistani passenger claimed that a black briefcase placed next to her seat by a uniformed ground attendant in Dubai was retrieved by one of the hijackers before departure, but this report has not been confirmed. In addition, the Kuwaiti security guard on board said that as the plane began taxiing in Dubai, one of the terrorists insisted on using one particular restroom, suggesting that the weapons may have been hidden there. [REDACTED]

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The Case against Iranian Involvement

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Iran appears to have been surprised by the incident:

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[REDACTED]

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- According to the released passengers, the terrorists do not appear to have received any weapons or other equipment after the plane landed in Tehran.

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- The hostages say there was no indication of a close rapport between the terrorists and Iranian personnel in contact with them. They did not see any messages being passed. [redacted]

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Tehran also apparently followed some standard counter-terrorist procedures in handling the crisis. [redacted]

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- Iranian officials negotiated deliberately, insisting on the spelling of words and frequent repetition to make certain of their meaning.

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- The Iranians also apparently were skillful in distracting the terrorists, engaging in protracted negotiations over the use of the ground power unit, even though the aircraft's own power unit provided most of the power needed.

- [redacted] these ruses may have been intended to wear down and distract the terrorists. [redacted]

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The Possibility of Iranian Complicity

We cannot rule out the possibility that elements of the Iranian Government knew about the hijacking beforehand or were involved with the hijackers during the ordeal. Representatives of several ministries, particularly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Foreign Ministry, support various terrorist groups and sometimes plan terrorist operations, often without the knowledge of other elements of the Iranian Government. [redacted]

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[redacted] Iranian officials, particularly those in Lebanon, could have helped plan the Kuwaiti airliner hijacking. [redacted]

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[redacted] The hostages acknowledge they could not observe all of the hijackers' activities. The hijackers may have received support or encouragement from the radical Iranian officials initially in charge at the airport which the hostages were unable to detect. [redacted]

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Tehran's inconsistent handling of the hijacking may also have been, in part, the result of disagreements among elements or officials within the Iranian Government. Hardliners-- particularly from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and possibly

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[redacted]

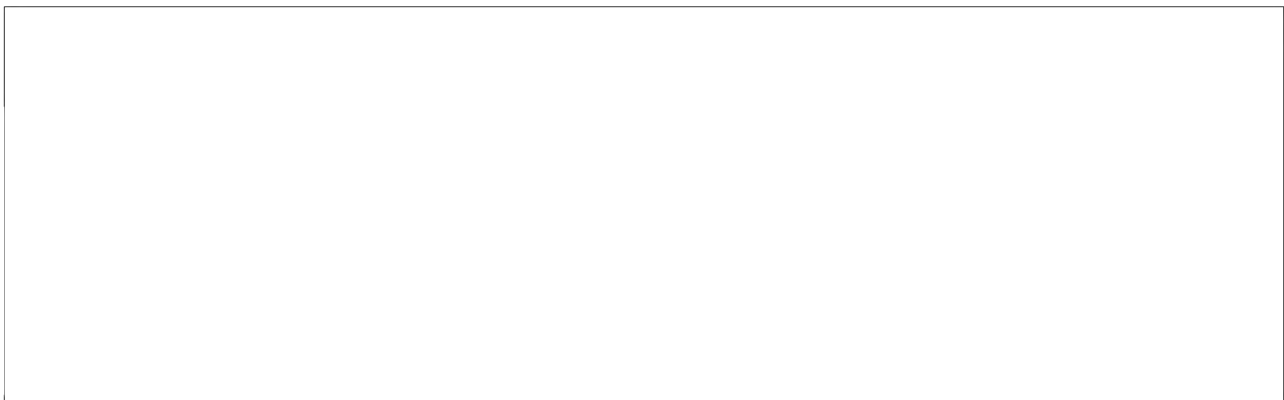
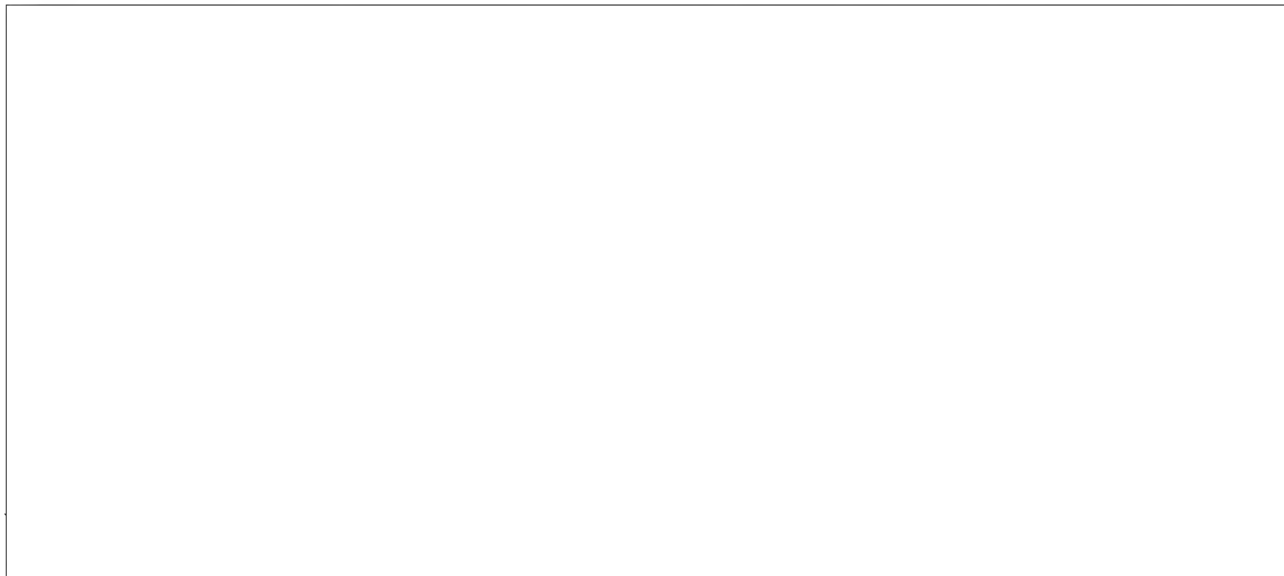
from the Foreign Ministry and Interior Ministry as well--probably supported the hijackers' objectives and argued that Tehran should cooperate with them as much as feasible. As it became apparent that Kuwait would not comply with the hijackers' demands, the more pragmatic elements evidently prevailed, probably because of international pressure. [redacted]

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Iran's Sympathies

Whether or not Tehran actively assisted the hijackers, Iran clearly was sympathetic to them and their goals. This sympathy produced Iranian behavior that complicated a prompt resolution of the incident:

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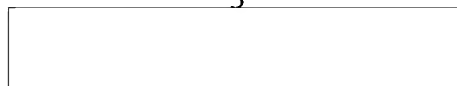
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The circumstances surrounding the rescue operation on 9 December, however, are very suspicious, and we do not believe the rescue operation was a genuine assault. We suspect, instead, that Iranian officials made a prior arrangement with the

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[redacted]

hijackers to stage the assault.

- Iranian security forces reportedly were firing their weapons as they stormed the aircraft, but no hostages or hijackers were killed or wounded. The principal objective of counterterrorist forces conducting such operations is to disable the terrorists.
- The hostages say the hijackers' conduct and attitude on the last day suggested that they knew some sort of conclusion to the incident was at hand. [redacted]

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The Aftermath

Evidence available shortly after the hijacking suggested that Tehran might try to mitigate the adverse effects the incident had on its image by appearing to deal harshly with hijackers:

- Tehran claimed it will try the hijackers for murder--a crime punishable by death in Iran.
- Tehran moderated its conditions for extraditing the hijackers. Initially, Iran said it would extradite the four terrorists only in exchange for Iranian opposition leader Rajavi, resident in France. Iran's chief justice later said Tehran is interested in reciprocal extradition agreements and would consider extraditing the four terrorists if other countries extradited the hijackers of Iranian aircraft.

[redacted] 25X1

Nevertheless, since December, Iran has obstructed Kuwaiti efforts to retrieve the hijacked aircraft and it appears that Tehran has no intention of releasing the aircraft to Kuwait. For several weeks, Iran would not allow a team of Kuwaiti technicians to come to Mehrabad airport to inspect the aircraft. [redacted]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Despite Iran's public statements that it will eventually try the terrorists,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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The hijackers almost certainly will not be incarcerated in a criminal prison, nor are they likely to be tried for the murder of the two American diplomats.

there is an obscure Iranian law that automatically provides amnesty and asylum in Iran for any Muslim who kills a non-Muslim.

[REDACTED]

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APPENDIX:
CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS DURING KUWAITI AIRCRAFT HIJACKING
(Note: All times are approximate Tehran local times)

4 December

0235

Kuwaiti Airlines flight 221 from Dubai to Karachi hijacked and forced to fly to Mehrabad Airport, Tehran. Total of approximately 166 people aboard: 151 passengers (including three USAID employees and a US businessman), 11 crew, and four hijackers.

Soon after the plane landed, USAID employee Charles Hegna was shot and killed. Hijackers demanded that the plane be refueled and food be brought on board.

0930

Hijackers announced to tower that their "first and last demand" is for the release of the Dawa" prisoners in Kuwait.

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1740

Hijackers released 19 passengers after aircraft is refueled.

5 December

0630

Injured aircraft guard released.

morning

Two Kuwaiti passengers broadcast appeals over radio; lead hijacker cut one with axe from aircraft. Terrorists then pretended to kill two Kuwaitis.

2030

Doctor allowed on board aircraft to treat Kuwaiti passenger suffering from heart problem. Two other passengers also reportedly suffering heart ailments, and hijackers offered to exchange them for Kuwaiti Charge in Tehran.

6 December

0230

Kuwaiti negotiating team, headed by Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, arrived in Tehran.

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Before 0740 Mr. William Stanford, USAID, killed on the platform of the aircraft after broadcasting appeal on radio and told to give a countdown to his execution. The hijacker calling himself Abu Hassan was involved in Stanford's killing.

0740 Hijackers claim to have killed two passengers-- Stanford and a Kuwaiti. Pakistani passenger escapes from the aircraft.

0740 Hijackers first contacted Kuwaiti negotiating team. Discussions lasted only 10 minutes. Hijackers threatened to kill the remaining US citizens if the Kuwaiti prisoners are not released.

0915 Photographer allowed to approach door of aircraft and take pictures of bodies of Kuwaiti passengers allegedly killed earlier in the day.

Before 1045 Hijackers demanded a new crew be supplied for the aircraft.

Before 1444 Kuwaiti flight engineer suffering from heart ailment released by hijackers.

afternoon First beatings of the two remaining American hostages by the hijacker calling himself Khalid.

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1840 Four more passengers released from aircraft.

Later Twenty more passengers, all Pakistanis, released.

7 December

0000 Time set by hijackers for Kuwait to meet demands or plane would be blown up. First actual deadline set by hijackers. Allowed to pass.

0700 Revised deadline, but this one passed unmarked too.

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- 1906 Hijackers' first statement broadcast on Iran radio. Statement condemned Kuwait, justified killing of Hegna and Stanford as CIA agents. Claimed killing of two other unspecified persons; said next to be killed would be presumably USAID employee Kapar (although name and title garbled) and three named Kuwaiti diplomats.
- 2300 Eight more passengers released (6 Pakistanis and 2 Iranians described as students.) Released passengers said only two Americans had been killed.

8 December

- 1130 Sixteen more persons released (nationalities not specified).
- sometime Second beatings of the American hostages by Khalid and Abu Hassan.
- 1407 Hijackers told tower that the "trial" of the Americans "will now begin."
- 1730 Hijackers told tower they would release all those "not connected with this matter."
- 1800 Hijackers' second statement carried by Tehran media. Repeated above release offer and reasserted terrorists' intent toward remaining captives.
- 2015 23 hostages--all Pakistanis--released.
- 2030, . Deadline set by "Islamic Jihad" in earlier anonymous call to Agence France Press in Beirut. Caller said killing of Kuwaiti diplomats would begin if demand not met; reiterated position that hijackers were not members of "Islamic Jihad" but enjoyed "group's" full support.

9 December

- Morning Kuwaiti negotiating team left Tehran; said negotiations will be handled by diplomatic personnel on scene.
- 1140 Hijackers declared they wanted to leave Tehran; demanded new aircraft.

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1349 AFP reported two unscheduled Syrian airliners landed in Tehran. No word on who was aboard.

1520 Hijackers broadcast "last will and testament" to control tower, rejected food, and broke communications.

1619 Ambassadors from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Pakistan, Algeria, and Bangladesh summoned to Mehrabad airport, presumably to witness Iranian rescue operation.

1635 Hijackers renewed communications with tower. Final prayers reported, explosives said to be planted. Renewed threat to blow up plane and demand another aircraft.

1710 Food delivered to aircraft.

2037 Hijackers said they would "release the innocent and kill the criminals."

2002 Mehrabad tower informed the hijackers that a "bus" had arrived and was under the aircraft. Hijackers repeated threat to blow up plane with American and Kuwaiti hostages. Tower pleaded with hijackers to wait until their previously set 2400 deadline.

2145 Seven more hostages released: six crew members and a "flight engineer."

2345 IRNA reported that Iranian security forces "stormed" the plane. Hijackers came out with their hands up, and remaining hostages walked out. According to the IRNA report, the troops had hidden close to the plane and entered when the hijackers requested a clean-up crew. Gunfire reported, but no casualties announced. The two Kuwaitis the hijackers claimed to have killed were among the nine hostages "rescued," confirming that Hegna and Stanford were the only passengers killed.

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